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## **ABSTRACT**

This article scrutinises the usage of the words “we”, “us” and “our” by BBC radio journalists when reporting and discussing news and current affairs. By analysing reports and discussions on the ‘flagship’ Radio 4 *Today*, a daily news programme whose centrality to political and public debate is widely recognised, the article raises substantive questions about clarity, accuracy and impartiality in senior broadcast journalists’ choice of language. In exploring the assumptions which may underlie the invocation, via such language choices, of an implied community, and against the backdrop of the BBC’s commitment to impartiality in its Editorial Guidelines, the article identifies numerous recent examples where the choice of words and identifiers can be seen as undermining the BBC’s impartiality and which show several of its senior journalists adopting the first-person plural “we” when reporting on matters of public policy. The findings therefore indicate a general need to codify norms which are seen to integrate the need for accuracy as well as impartiality, and for these norms to take into account issues which might at first glance seem to be inconsequential, micro-level features of the journalists’ language. The evidence suggests that more fine-grained guidelines on permissible circumstances for BBC journalists’ usage of “we” and “our” need revising and disseminating in the light of these findings.

## **KEYWORDS**

BBC; Public Service Broadcasting; impartiality; *Today* programme; Radio 4; speaker footing; speaker roles; self-regulation.

# WHO ARE WE? LANGUAGE AND IMPARTIALITY IN BBC RADIO JOURNALISM.

## INTRODUCTION

We should try to avoid using “our” when we mean British. We are not Britain, we are the BBC.  
(from BBC guidelines given to its journalists during the Falklands war, cited by Rowley, 2015: 1)

What have we achieved in Afghanistan? We’ve lost 447 British lives there since our troops first went in, way, way back in 2002. We’ve spent at least £20 billion there, possibly more, the precise figure is difficult to estimate. This year we will withdraw. Did we win?

(Anchor; BBC Radio 4 *Today*; 21–1–14)

Who are ‘we’? What relationship between journalist and news audience is suggested by such language? What assumptions – professional, political, stylistic – underlie such an invocation of an implied community, and why are such utterances found not infrequently in certain types of segment of broadcast news programmes and yet almost never in others? This article examines the usage of the words “we”, “us” and “our” by BBC journalists when reporting and discussing news and current affairs. The ‘flagship’ Radio 4 programme *Today* is a daily news programme which reaches an audience of around seven million people each week. Its agenda-setting role and centrality to political and public debate is widely recognised. By sampling and analysing reports and discussions on the programme, the article raises substantive questions about clarity, accuracy and impartiality in senior broadcast journalists’ choice of language.

The BBC’s commitment to impartiality, as a public service broadcaster, has been enshrined, with varying emphases, in successive versions of its Editorial Guidelines, the current edition of which states that:

Our reporting should resist the temptation to use language and tone which appear to accept consensus or received wisdom as fact or self-evident and ... [o]ur audiences should not be able to tell from the BBC output the personal prejudices of our journalists or news and current affairs presenters on matters of public policy, political or industrial controversy, or on “controversial subjects” in other areas. (BBC, 2015: 4.2.1)

The guidelines are crystal-clear in one specific area, which, as will be argued below, is highly relevant to this analysis of the presenter’s stance or ‘footing’.

When dealing with controversial subjects concerning the BBC, our reporting must remain duly impartial, as well as accurate and fair. We need to ensure the BBC’s impartiality is not brought into question and presenters or reporters are not exposed to potential conflicts of interest. It will be inappropriate to refer to either the BBC as “we” or the content as “our”. There should also be clear editorial separation between those reporting the story and those responsible for presenting the BBC’s case. (BBC, 2015: 4.4.15)

This principle of “clear editorial separation” between the journalist and interviewee has implications beyond the BBC’s coverage of its own affairs. Part of what is at stake here is journalistic accuracy. It can be initially argued that the only strictly accurate use of the words “we” or “our” by a BBC journalist would be in reference to the specific editorial team producing a particular programme; for example: “we are hoping to speak to the minister” or “our

correspondent in Syria”. Any step beyond this could lead to confusion over the stance of the programme and/or the journalist. The roots of such concern can be traced at least as far back as the Falklands war of 1982, when the then prime minister Margaret Thatcher criticized the BBC’s *Newsnight* programme for its overtly even-handed reporting of conflicting claims by the British and Argentine military (see Harris, 1983: 152; McNair, 2003: 88). For the prime minister, there was a clear “them” and “us” and, in her opinion, the BBC should have embraced that point of view. This might have led, for example, to a report that “our troops (as opposed to ‘British troops’) have retaken Port Stanley”, whereas she in fact lamented what she referred to as the “chilling use of the third person” (Rowley, 2015: 1) upon hearing the BBC refer to military personnel as “they” rather than “we”.

Such journalistic preferences are part of the set of language choices (see below) which combine to display a concern for professional impartiality and their use during national crises, including war-time, is well attested (see for example, Morrison and Tumber’s data, also drawn from the reporting of the Falklands conflict, 1988: 270). However, our research has identified numerous recent examples in daily journalism where the choice of words and identifiers can be seen as undermining the BBC’s impartiality and shows several of its senior journalists adopting the first-person plural “we” when reporting on matters of public policy. Before exploring this evidence in more detail, within the framework of Goffman’s (1981) model of “speaker footing”, this article will first establish and review the wider professional and conceptual context within which these specific instances occur.

## **“WE” AND “OUR” IN BROADCAST POLITICAL INTERVIEWS**

Previous studies of journalistic impartiality in public service broadcasting have tended to focus on quantitatively oriented content analyses of the depiction of political, industrial or military conflict, and have predominantly taken as their unit of analysis the overall news programme or a section thereof (e.g., Eldridge, 1995; Philo and Berry, 2004). The current study, by contrast, considers discrete ways in which the observance of institutional and professional guidelines on impartiality may be fulfilled – or compromised – by broadcast journalists’ specific language choices at the micro level, such as pronominal usage and its link to the construction of identity. Those previous studies of impartiality which have in fact focussed on (micro) language level analyses have tended to concentrate on the use of loaded lexical items, such as “terrorist” or “freedom fighter”, conventionally seen as indicators of journalistic approbation or censure (see, for example, Gaber *et al.*, 2009), rather than on personal pronouns and related “closed set” linguistic choices.

Previous studies of pronominal use in broadcast interviews – specifically, the use of first and third person plural personal subject pronouns (“we” and “they”), object pronouns (“us” and “them”) or possessive adjectives (“our” and “their”) as indicators of inclusion in or exclusion from community membership – have largely explored the deployment of pronoun shift by *interviewees* (usually politicians), rather than by journalists, whether as a strategy of political equivocation (see Fetzer and Bull, 2008), of persuasion (Alber *et al.*, 2002), of solidarity (De Fina, 1995; Íñigo-Mora, 2004), or as a means of evoking unity (Moberg and Eriksson, 2013: 315) or “nationalistic emotions” (Proctor and Su, 2011: 3251).

The potential complexity and ambivalence of politicians’ use of “we” is well captured by Moberg and Eriksson (2013: 322):

When the leader of the Centre Party proclaims “we will go the sustainable way” it is uncertain if “we” includes the speaker, along with some designated others (the members of the Government, the Alliance) or does “we” refer to the nation or the state, in a vague and generic sense, in which case the actual degree of personal involvement/commitment on the part of the speaker becomes ambiguous.

Relatedly, Wilson (1990: 76) summarizes how the use of personal pronouns may be manipulated for political purposes:

.... politicians make use of pronouns to good effect: to indicate, accept, deny or distance themselves from responsibility for political action; to reveal ideological bias; to encourage solidarity; to designate and identify those who are supporters (with us) as well as those who are enemies (against us); and to represent specific idiosyncratic aspects of the individual politician’s own personality.

The broadcast *journalists’* role and viewpoint, on the other hand, have hitherto been neglected in such pronominal studies. Similarly, while there is a substantial body of research on political news interviews (for example, Clayman and Heritage 2002; Ekström *et al.* 2012; Hutchby, 2006; Montgomery 2007a) which have focused on ways in which journalistic neutrality is displayed – or compromised – by interactional features (interruptions; re-framing of questions; the tackling of interviewee evasiveness) none has specifically focused on journalistic usage of first person pronouns (and associated possessive adjectives).

Conversational interaction in radio news, specifically, may be broken down into four main categories: (a) interaction between journalists and interviewees (e.g., politicians, other public figures, spokespersons, witnesses to news events); (b) two-way interaction between journalists (e.g., between anchor and reporter, or weather or sports presenter, etc.; see Lundell, 2010); (c) interaction between journalists and listeners (usually through phone-in programmes of various types); and (d) interaction between journalists, listeners and interviewees (as in certain phone-in programmes). Of central concern is the first of these, which can be sub-categorised, as Montgomery argues (2007b: 147 and 159), into “accountability” interviews, “experiential” interviews and “expert” interviews. The use by radio journalists on BBC news programmes of the first person plural pronouns and possessive adjective is almost exclusively found in interactive sub-sections of the programme: specifically, either in “two-way” exchanges between news anchor (i.e., the programme presenter) and reporter or correspondent, or during an interview with a non-journalist, typically a politician or external “expert”.

## METHOD AND ANALYTICAL APPROACH

The analytical data is drawn from an extended sample, ranging over a two year period, of broadcast output from BBC Radio 4’s *Today* programme, whose agenda-defining centrality within British public and political debate has been well documented (see Donovan, 1997: 193–199; Luckhurst, 2001: 85–87; and Hendy, 2007: 319, who describes the programme’s “mutation into an organ of the British constitution” and Berry, 2012: 256, who points out that it was voted the most influential programme in broadcasting by British MPs), and within which the interview segments have in recent decades gradually become the main constituent part of the programme (Hutchby, 2006: 121).

It should be emphasised that the analytical approach adopted in this study is specifically qualitative in nature, based on the premise that *any* apparent transgression of the institutional guidelines is of potential significance, rather than seeking to demonstrate that a particular

percentage of broadcast news anchor utterances contain a questionable first-person plural usage (in the same way, for example, that transgressions of codified guidelines for *written* journalism, such as IPSO's Editors' Code of Practice, are potentially significant in themselves and are not necessarily rendered negligible by quantitative comparison with other published news stories which contain no such transgression). Moreover, the examples found in our data are in clear conflict with the BBC's own norms on impartiality and accuracy, and instances occur involving all five news anchors (presenters) who hosted the programme during the period reviewed. At the same time, however, it is recognised that live broadcast journalism will often include improvised or semi-improvised speech, and that occasional inadvertent verbal clumsiness may uncontroversially occur, hence the need to demonstrate (as the analysis below will show) that such occurrences can in fact be *regularly* found and categorised. In view of this, the sample of broadcast output assembled for this study is based on an approximation of the "constructed week" sampling procedure (see Bell, 1991: 23, Connolly-Ahern *et al.*, 2009; and Riffe *et al.*, 1993). This involves assembling a set of recordings in such a way that different times and days of the week are equitably sampled, even though the dates of the recordings are spread over a two-year period (May 2013 to May 2015). This procedure yielded the equivalent of two constructed weeks, in line with Hester and Dougall's recommendation (2007), each with samples of broadcast output from Monday to Saturday (the programme is not broadcast on a Sunday). The samples also range across the three hour duration of the programme (from 6 am to 9 am). The overall sampling strategy therefore bears comparison with the sampling procedures used in studies of personal pronoun use by politicians (see, for example, Alber *et al.*, 2002, Moberg and Eriksson, 2013, Proctor and Su, 2011) as well as with other studies of broadcast interviews with comparable analytical foci (Berry, 2012, Hutchby, 2011, Rendle-Short, 2007). As with Clayman's study of the broadcast interviewer's role, the "transcript excerpts reproduced in the article are thus illustrative of more general regularities" (2002: 200).

Relevant segments and exchanges (namely, those where use by the journalist has been identified of first-person plural subject pronouns, object pronouns, possessive adjectives or possessive pronouns) have been transcribed. The style of transcription draws upon the distinction drawn by Bucholz (2000) and Davidson (2009) between naturalised and de-naturalised transcription, wherein the former may involve standardising the transcribed text so as to optimise its ready intelligibility, including, where relevant, the addition of appropriate punctuation. Our preference for this form of transcription is, firstly, a reflection of the fact that much of the broadcast output in question is scripted or semi-scripted, in view of the somewhat ambiguous status of the news anchor's speech, which is a hybrid of pre-written segments and improvised or semi-improvised speech. Secondly, those linguistic or paralinguistic features which can be captured by a narrower, de-naturalised style of transcription commonly used in conversation analysis (such as intonational patterns, emphatic stress, other phonetic or phonological detail, pauses, volume, tempo, exhalations), while often significant in other methodological contexts, are not directly applicable to our analysis's specific lexicogrammatical focus (namely, on first person plural elements) and on the relationship between these elements and the socio-political context of the news topic under discussion in the programme, and would therefore risk unnecessarily obscuring the clarity of the examples used (see Ochs, 1999: 168 and Bucholz, 2000: 1461). At the same time, care has been taken to ensure that all the transcribed segments faithfully reflect the actual utterances, without any tidying up of the broadcast speech (see Bell, 1991: 82–83; Bucholz, 2000: 14).

Goffman's 'participation framework' model, which incorporates the idea of changes in speaker stance or "footing" (1981) was developed as an attempt to capture subtle variations in our degree of "ownership" of any given utterance which we produce as speakers. Goffman himself made some preliminary applications of the model to radio speech (1981: 201–327), and

the model's specific usefulness for the analysis of broadcast news journalism has been highlighted by Higgins and Smith (2013: 41). Table 1 summarises the three speaker roles and makes an initial suggestion of their relevance for radio news journalism (to be explored in more detail in the analytical section which follows):

### ***TABLE 1 HERE***

In most speech situations, the standard footing involves any given speaker simultaneously assuming all three speaker roles. That is to say, in adopting a "normal" stance speakers are, as individuals, simultaneously the "formulators" of their speech, the "deliverers" of it, and (in some sense) the "believers" of the opinions expressed; in other words, they are at once the Authors, Animators and Principals of what they say. However, how does Goffman's framework map onto the role of a senior radio journalist?

The news anchor, often referred to as the news programme presenter, typically initiates the programme, introduces and interacts with the correspondents and analysts, and conducts interviews. On some channels the anchor reads out a few initial headlines as part of the programme's opening segment, after which the newsreader provides a fuller version of the same news items. This is the pattern on the main daily news programmes on BBC Radio 4 (*Today*, *The World at One*, *The World Tonight* and *The World This Weekend*). In terms of Goffman's "footing" framework, the news anchor may be both Animator-only, while reading the news headlines, for example, as these will normally have been written by another journalist, and Animator-Author, within a wide range of (semi-) improvised interventions: introductions, questions, summaries, rejoinders, reformulations, musings, and so on. Of particular interest to our consideration of the use of "we", however, is when the "Principal" position ("the party to whose position, stand, and belief the words attest") is also assumed by the journalist, as shall be seen.

## **ANALYSIS**

To begin with a preliminary analytical overview, it bears emphasising that Public Service Broadcasters (PSBs) in the UK are required to comply with guidelines designed to ensure that their journalism is impartial. The BBC has its own Editorial Guidelines, which conform to the Ofcom Code applying to all PSBs. Both the Guidelines and the Code stress the importance of impartiality:

We must do all we can to ensure that "controversial subjects" are treated with due impartiality in all our output. (BBC, 2015: 4.2.1)

Programmes ... must exclude all expressions of the views and opinions of the person providing the service on matters of political and industrial controversy and matters relating to current public policy (unless that person is speaking in a legislative forum or in a court of law). (Ofcom, 2011: 5.4)

Let us consider how such a regulatory context might be applied to the specific speaker roles inherent to radio news journalism. As seen in the previous section, it is precisely the anchor's professional requirement to switch between different speaker roles which makes it the key figure of radio news discourse. Given such a broad professional brief, there is arguably more scope for the institutional voice to potentially be coloured by the personal. If instances of

such colouring can be identified, their incidence may be intentional or otherwise. In fact, any such occurrence which is *clearly* intentional is so rare as to be likely to acquire some notoriety, as with the following instance:

Good morning. And let's start the morning by raising our hats to the London policemen, who once again have had their weekends mucked up by a lot of silly hooligans.

(Anchor; BBC Radio 4; July 1968.)

Broadcast following the Grosvenor Square anti-Vietnam war demonstration, such apparently overt opinionising, and such an assumption of an implied community (via the first person plural "let's start") would be unthinkable from a newsreader and is extremely rare even from journalists filling the anchor role. However, less overt intrusion of personal assumptions may also be observed, and this is where the use of "we" as a linguistic choice may also suggest the assumption of a Principal position (to re-quote Goffman (1981: 221), "the party to whose position, stand, and belief the words attest"). For example, in an interview on the *Today* programme about the funding of the Labour Party, presenter A appeared to cross the line when he raised the question of the influence of the big trade unions.

... the effect of this might be that the biggest of the trade unions – and they're the ones that we're all scared of – at least some people are scared of – because they're so big and so powerful now – that in the short term at any rate – will gain power, they will increase their influence?

(Anchor; BBC Radio 4 *Today*; 10–9–13)

Whether it is actually A's personal opinion that the biggest trade unions are too powerful, his words were certainly open to that interpretation and he was quick to correct himself. This resonates with the widely cited moment from the 1977 Frost-Nixon interviews (see, for example, Clayman, 2002: 202) in which the journalist David Frost re-phrased his intervention as follows:

I would like to hear you say ... I think the American people would like to hear you say ...

If a journalist identifies him or herself with a particular point of view, in Goffman's terms with a particular "Principal" position, there is a clear risk of breaching the terms of the Guidelines quoted above. But impartiality goes beyond the avoidance of expressing personal views. The BBC guidelines also specifically alert journalists to the dangers of identifying themselves with a presumed consensus. The instance of self-repair in the *Today* example above, what Goffman terms a broadcast journalist's "restart" (1981: 208), is significant: the speaker is clearly aware of the need to frame such a provocative comment regarding trade unions carefully, hence the change from "we're all scared" to "some people are scared", which has the crucial effect of projecting the "Principal" position away from the journalist.

While on the one hand, the BBC Guidelines warn (4.4.2) against giving undue weight to the views of minorities as opposed to "the prevailing consensus" (for example, in debating climate change), on the other, they clearly state:

... our reporting should resist the temptation to use language and tone which appear to accept consensus or received wisdom as fact or self-evident. (BBC, 2015: 4.4.19)

One section of the Editorial Guidelines is especially pertinent to the present discussion. In a section headed "Where BBC Content or the BBC is the Story", the guidelines focus on impartiality in a case where a BBC journalist is the interviewer and a representative of the BBC is the interviewee:



When dealing with controversial subjects concerning the BBC, our reporting must remain duly impartial, as well as accurate and fair. We need to ensure the BBC's impartiality is not brought into question and presenters or reporters are not exposed to potential conflicts of interest. It will be inappropriate to refer to either the BBC as "we" or the content as "our". There should also be clear editorial separation between those reporting the story and those responsible for presenting the BBC's case. (BBC, 2015: 4.4.15)

The clarity of this guidance is striking in the light of the instances to be discussed, in which adoption of the terms "we" and "our" arguably raise questions about the BBC's impartiality just as serious as those highlighted in the section of the guidelines above. The crucial phrase here is the reference to "clear editorial separation" between those reporting the story and those responsible for presenting the case of the organisation under scrutiny (here, the BBC). What is right when covering the BBC is arguably equally desirable when reporting on other organisations, such as the Government or British Forces.

Our data reveals at least one instance from the *Today* programme, in which the presenter used the word "here" to mean "at the BBC", during an interview about the Corporation's responsibility for the abuse of children by Jimmy Savile on its premises. This might be considered a blurring of the boundary between the journalist responsible for reporting the story and the person presenting the BBC's case. In other *Today* interviews about recent controversies involving the BBC, we found the "clear separation" which the guidelines require. This may be evidence either that the guidelines reflect an instinct towards impartiality for BBC journalists reporting on the Corporation, or that the highlighting of the dangers in the guidelines has had the desired effect.

In an interview in January 2014, presenter B interviewed former US General Stanley McChrystal about the withdrawal of NATO forces from Afghanistan. Had the BBC, rather than NATO, been his subject, he would have been in clear breach of the guideline and his impartiality would (in those terms) be in question:

What have we achieved in Afghanistan? We've lost 447 British lives there since our troops first went in, way, way back in 2002. We've spent at least £20 billion there, possibly more, the precise figure is difficult to estimate. This year we will withdraw. Did we win? Was it worth it? Are we cutting and running, are we blundering, out as some suggest we blundered in, and in so doing are we endangering the progress that's been made?

(Anchor; BBC Radio 4 *Today*; 21-1-14)

Apart from the section specifically dealing with coverage of the BBC, nothing in the guidelines on impartiality, or on accuracy, deals with the potential pitfall of a journalist apparently identifying him or herself with an organisation which is itself a subject of their journalism. Perhaps it was considered, journalistically, to be so unlikely as not to merit mention. Yet, as has been shown, there are examples from the *Today* programme where the word "we" appears implicitly to link the journalist to the position of, for example the British Government, NATO, or an expert community. Such usage could be considered to be inaccurate, potentially confusing, and out of line with the requirement for transparent impartiality. If, as we suggest, there is not always the "clear editorial separation" between *Today* journalists and those presenting the case of, for example, the Government, there may be a case for the guidelines to be revised, to extend the clarity of section 4.4.15 to a wider sphere.

It might be argued that the usage discussed below represents a move towards informality and the use of colloquial language by journalists in an attempt to close the distance between

themselves and their audience. However, Kevin Marsh, former head of the BBC's College of Journalism has emphasised the importance of clear impartiality in a changing media landscape:

Values such as impartiality – however described or characterized – could be and are emerging as important markers that distinguish deliberate acts of serious journalism from the noise out on the web. (Marsh, 2012: 71)

Such ideas notwithstanding, there are a whole range of different Principal positions which can be invoked by the use of “we”, raising significant questions about impartiality and journalistic accuracy. Before exploring these issues in detail, it will be helpful to establish what relatively straight, impartial presentation might sound like.

In April 2014 Presenter C interviewed Michael Fallon, minister for business and enterprise, about a National Audit Office (NAO) report on the privatisation of Royal Mail. This was an example of a clearly impartial interview, at least with regard to pronominal usage, in which C at no point identified himself with any point of view or interested party. On one side of the argument was the Government, on the other “the taxpayer” or “the country”. The only use of the word “us” refers to the editorial team on the *Today* programme. In this extract, C first referred to investors who made a quick profit from the privatisation.

C: They made £750m which should be in the taxpayer's pocket. That's the NAO's conclusion.

MF: That's not quite right ... some sold because they thought the shares were becoming overvalued.

C: Well, no, they thought there was money to be made because the shares were too cheap. Can you just tell us, has the department sought an explanation from Lazards and Goldman Sachs – who won't give us a statement about this – about their advice and whether the price of 330 was a good judgement or not?

MF: Certainly we discussed this ... we managed to get the privatisation away.

C: You're saying – let's just get this clear – you're saying that the country got a good deal from this sale?

(BBC Radio 4 *Today*; 4–4–14)

In the same broadcast presenter D introduced an item about the possible imposition by the British Government of trade sanctions against Russia in response to the Ukrainian crisis. A document had come to light suggesting that the Government would not “curb trade with Russia or close London's financial centre to Russians”. Before a discussion with external commentators, D conducted a two-way interview with the BBC's Political Editor (an “affiliated” interview, to use Montgomery's term, 2007b: 147) on the background to the story. In her first question she referred to the fact that “Britain” did not support trade sanctions, asked what “they” (Britain) would be prepared to do, and what “the West” should be doing? She later asked the correspondent whether there was evidence that “the UK and the EU” had a different position from the US. Throughout this section D clearly distanced herself from the subjects of her questions. While this may seem unremarkable, we will show that journalists on the *Today* programme are far from being consistent in this use of impartial language. Indeed it is worth noting that in his replies, the correspondent used the term “we” in two of the ways to be discussed below. First he said: “We know what the Government is and is not willing to do ...”. Later he added: “We want to keep the roubles flowing in, the French want to sell warships and the Germans want ...” While the first case might be considered neutral, the second certainly appears to identify the speaker with the position of “Britain” or the British Government. As will be seen, this has become a commonplace of presentation on *Today*.

We will now describe in detail a number of different ways the word “we” (and the related object pronoun and possessive adjective) can be used by a presenter or other BBC journalists on the *Today* programme. The fact that the word can carry more than one meaning is highly significant in itself, in terms of accuracy – although it may well be argued that the audience is perfectly capable of interpreting its meaning in different contexts. However, as will be seen, the ways in which presenters identify themselves with others via the term “we” can cause legitimate confusion about where they stand in relation to the subject under discussion and to the Principal position (“the party to whose position, stand, and belief the words attest”). In this case it is the need for transparent impartiality which is at stake, but also the need to satisfy what Clayman terms (2002: 196) “the complex journalistic requirement ... of being interactionally ‘adversarial’ while remaining officially ‘neutral’.”

### ***“Principal” position (1): “We” the team on the *Today* programme.***

Presenter A introduced an item on British attitudes to the European union based on the British Social Attitudes Survey, beginning with a pre-recorded interview clip.

...results not published yet, but its co-founder Alison Parkes has been looking at them and she told us about the attitudes to the European Union ...

(Anchor; BBC Radio 4 *Today*; 15–5–15)

Presenter E referred to an item broadcast earlier in the programme:

... an hour ago we had Alleem Maqbool’s report on Iraq ...

(Anchor; BBC Radio 4 *Today*; 20–5–13)

It could be argued that “we”, referring to the *Today* production team, is the only accurate use of the term within the programme. Any other usage is open to interpretation (and to misinterpretation). As Bull and Fetzer argue (2006: 5)

In the dynamic event of a political interview, the domain of reference anchored to the noun phrase for which a pronoun stands is not always unambiguously clear. Because of an individual’s multiple social, discursive, and interactional roles, a person pronoun can refer to more than one identity.

### ***“Principal” position (2): The British Government***

Presenter E interviewed the Secretary of State for Defence about Afghans detained by British forces. At one point he said:

Can I just ask how many you’re holding? Can I just get the facts straight? Do you know how many we’re holding there?

(Anchor; BBC Radio 4 *Today*; 29–5–13)

In that one question, he crossed the boundary so clearly defined in the Editorial Guidelines when referring to interviews about the BBC. (“There should ... be clear editorial separation between those reporting the story and those responsible for presenting the BBC’s case.” BBC, 2015: 4.4.15) Arguably this clear separation is even more important in discussion of controversial Government policy or actions.

Another interview on Government policy revealed the same confusion. Presenter A interviewed the Foreign Secretary William Hague about the military take-over in Egypt.)

A: So, do we now, having recognised the former president, do we now say, he's gone, we now recognise a new military government in Egypt?

WH: Well, we don't support military intervention ... whatever our feelings about operating in this way.

A: So the answer to my question is, yes, we do recognise this new military regime.

(BBC Radio 4; 4–7–14)

Later in the same interview, A appears to align himself completely with a concept of “we” as Britain or the British State.

Are there lessons for us to learn in this case, because our knee-jerk position is always, or has for a very, very long time been, at the first stirrings of democracy in an autocratic country, a country ruled by an autocratic regime, has always been to say, we're with you in every conceivable way, we'll help you in all sorts of ways, sometimes with sanctions or sometimes with moral support or sometimes even with military intervention. Isn't it about time we started saying, actually there's an argument for the old regime continuing because at least it provides stability, under the new system there might be real dangers for us?

(BBC Radio 4; 4–7–14)

In another interview about British policy, presenter B began with the authentic use of “us” to mean the *Today* programme. He then made clear that his “we” referred to the Government (perhaps in order to clarify an apparent clash with the previous “us”). He continued with “our” in the same sentence and “we” in the next. He was interviewing the Defence Secretary about the British response to Russian policy towards Ukraine. In all but the first case (referring to the *Today* programme) he clearly identified himself with “the British Government”.

What Lord Dannett, the former head of the Army told us the other day was that we should immediately – the British Government – should immediately look again at plans to withdraw our remaining troops from Germany in 2020. And actually we should keep, he suggested, 3000 or so troops in Germany. Are you tempted to do that?

(Anchor; BBC Radio 4 *Today*; 27–3–14)

### ***“Principal” position (3): “We” the British people***

In his full introduction to the item about British attitudes to the EU (see above), presenter A began by saying:

‘Are you becoming more sceptical about our membership of the European Union? A lot of people are – or so the polls suggest ...’

(Anchor; BBC Radio 4 *Today*; 15–5–13)

In a follow-up interview with Rick Nye of market research company Populus, A said:

If the politicians stopped banging on about it, we'd more or less forget about it, wouldn't we, it wouldn't bother us very much ...

(Anchor; BBC Radio 4 *Today*; 15–5–13)

The presenter begins by addressing the listeners directly as “you” and then joins them as part of a shared (“our”) membership of the EU. The listener assumes that by “we” A means the British people because the survey is about British attitudes. Such instances exemplify

Anderson's (2006) argument about the news media's role in invoking a sense of "imagined (national) community" (see also Petersoo, 2007). Later, the same journalist reinforces the impression that he is one of "the British people" (rather than a dispassionate observer of them). It is striking that in an intervening question he moves between the two positions:

Right, but is there any sign that we're becoming – put aside whether we're becoming more or less sceptical – are we becoming more or less interested in Europe – as you say, if you raise the question with people, they'll give a view but if you don't raise question is there any way of knowing what their level of interest is ....?

(Anchor; BBC Radio 4 *Today*; 15–5–13)

There seems to be a real confusion here between the journalist as external observer and the journalist as a member of a group (in this case the British people) which is, itself, the subject of discussion, a confusion partly related to the intrinsic ambiguity of the first-person plural, which, as Bull and Fetzer remind us (2006: 9 and 13), can be either exclusive or inclusive (in that there are circumstances and contexts which may imply that the speaker, or indeed the addressee, may or may not be part of the "we" in question). In other examples it will be seen how this confusion can lead the journalist even further into compromising his impartiality. There is a further question, which is whether it means anything to talk of how "we" feel about Europe. Among the audience there are likely to be listeners with very different views and who may disagree with the assumption that they are part of a greater "we" with a common opinion.

#### ***"Principal" position (4): The people of England***

Presenter D introduced an item on diseases of trees:

Did ash die-back disease show that we're not protecting our trees and plants well enough and is the answer to have a chief plant health officer just as we have a chief vet.

(Anchor; BBC Radio 4 *Today*; 20–5–14)

The first point to observe here is that the presenter is again aligning herself with the group, in this case people who "are not protecting our trees". What would this mean to a listener who is protecting his or her trees – or supporting a charity which is protecting trees? Is there such a "we"? Presumably, again, this should be read as shorthand for a national group. The interesting thing to observe in this case is that while the presenter may have meant "we, the people of Britain", in terms of accuracy, her statement is confusing as Wales, Scotland and Northern Ireland have their own chief veterinary officers.

Presenter A introduced an interview with the former Education Secretary, David Blunkett:

What do our schools need, given that so many of them are struggling? A new layer of local officials called directors of school standards? It's the idea of David Blunkett ... who's on the line now ...

(Anchor; BBC Radio 4 *Today*; 30–4–14)

This item goes to the question of accuracy as much as impartiality. This introductory link is confusing and there are several layers of straightforward inaccuracy. In fact, the presenter is referring to state schools in England as the policy could not be applied to Wales, Scotland or

Northern Ireland (this was made clear in a report on the BBC News website on the same date).<sup>1</sup> Nor would it apply to private schools. It becomes clear during the interview that academies and free schools (which are common in England, but do not exist in Wales, for example) would be affected, but the link is not clear on this issue.

***“Principal” position (5): Irish and British citizens***

In this item, presenter A interviewed Adam Weiss, legal director of the Advice on Individual Rights in Europe centre, about a ruling of the European Court of Justice on the entitlement of citizens of EU countries to claim benefits in other member states. Weiss pointed out that the legal issue centred on a test applied by the British Government. He said Irish and British citizens always passed this “right to reside” test.

A: Well we would, wouldn’t we, because we live here?

AW: Yes ... but other EU citizens don’t always pass.

A: But isn’t that right, isn’t that fair? After all, if we live here and we’ve paid our taxes all our lives and all the rest of it, and these are universal benefits but they’re means tested rather than contribution based, then surely it’s right that we should qualify but those who have not lived here and paid their taxes etc, etc shouldn’t qualify?

(Anchor; BBC Radio 4 *Today*; 30–5–13)

It may be that A meant only to align himself with other British citizens, but an accurate interpretation of his phrasing would be that the “we” refers to both Irish and British citizens, who – according to Weiss – enjoy rights denied to other EU citizens in Britain. As Cramer (2010) points out, delicate nuances in attitudes to European / national identity can be conveyed via pronominal choices.

As the discussion progresses, the presenter’s use of “we” becomes less clear. Does he still mean British (and Irish) citizens, or is he now referring in a more general way to “Britain” or the United Kingdom and its position in relation to the potential legal challenge?

AW: These are the rules.

A: Yes, but we’ve said we don’t like them, we don’t want them, we’re not going to have them – can they make us have them?

AW: It’s a basic law point ...

A: But we said don’t want it. We’re quite clear about it.

AW: We’re members of the EU so we do want it.

A: I know, but we’ve said we’re not going to have it. Are there any ways in which they can force us to change the law or are there penalties they can impose on us if we don’t?

AW: .... we’re a country that respects the rule of law.

(Anchor; BBC Radio 4 *Today*; 3–5–13)

***“Principal” position (6): The British taxpayer***

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<sup>1</sup> <http://www.bbc.co.uk/news/education-27206083>

Presenter E introduced an item about Major Tim Peak, a British astronaut who was expected to visit the international space station. E described the astronaut as “the first tax-payer funded one, he’s costing us £6m” (Anchor; BBC Radio 4; 20–5–14).

The identification with British taxpayers (of which E is presumably one) may be intended as a wider reference to the British people (not all of whom are taxpayers).

### ***“Principal” position (7): Britain’s armed forces***

The item already referred to about Afghans held by British forces opened with an introduction from presenter E in which he appears to adopt the position of the forces, although arguably his “we” could be interpreted as a reference either to the British Government (whose policy this presumably is) or to “Britain”.

Now in principle, when British troops pick up suspects they can hold them for up to 96 hours then should release them or hand them over to the Afghan authorities. But it appears we don’t want to release a number of detainees and neither do we want to put them into the Afghan legal system because we don’t trust it.

(Anchor; BBC Radio 4 *Today*; 27–3–14)

As Montgomery argues in relation to a Channel 4 television news anchor’s reference to “the Sadaam Hussein we went to war with” (2007b: 151), such pronominal usages “invoke not only the UK government but also the audience/public on whose behalf the government acts”.

### ***“Principal” position (8): Britain/the British state / “the British”***

The item on Afghans held by British Forces offers a further interpretation of “we” – in this case specifically identified as “the British”.

E: An interpretation of what’s going on here is that the British are in a bit of a conundrum about what to do because these may be people who have been trying to kill British troops and we would like to release them to the Afghan judicial system. They’re in Afghanistan, they’re Afghans, that’s the procedure and we’re not handing them over for their own protection.

(Anchor; BBC Radio 4 *Today*; 21–1–14)

It is apparent that when discussion focuses on foreign affairs, the use of “we” is tempting for the journalists. In this example (referred to previously), presenter B interviewed US General Stanley McChrystal about the pull-out of western forces from Afghanistan. On the face of it, “we” here refers to Britain (447 British lives lost), although – as will be seen – later in the interview it takes on a wider meaning, which may well be implied in the question “did we win?”.

What have we achieved in Afghanistan? We’ve lost 447 British lives there since our troops first went in, way, way back in 2002. We’ve spent at least £20 billion there possibly more, the precise figure is difficult to estimate. This year we will withdraw. Did we win? Was it worth it? Are we cutting and running, are we blundering, out as some suggest we blundered in, and in so doing are we endangering the progress that’s been made? Or has enough been done to secure something worth laying down lives for?

(Anchor; BBC Radio 4 *Today*; 21–1–14)

### ***“Principal” position (9): The West/NATO***

In the interview with Gen McChrystal, presenter B later asks a question which appears to align his “we” with NATO or the US-UK joint action in Afghanistan.

What are your fears about what might happen if western forces are pretty much gone at the end of 2014 and politically we don’t remain engaged?

(Anchor; BBC Radio 4 *Today*; 21–1–14)

In a follow-up interview later in the same programme, presenter A appeared content to identify his “we” with the Americans, raising the question of the effectiveness of the Afghan army and fears that

... they’re not going to be an Army in the sense that we were - the Americans or whoever our soldiers were - while we were there.

(Anchor; BBC Radio 4 *Today*; 21–1–14)

Presenter E appeared to identify his “we” with “the west” when interviewing the former Foreign Secretary Jack Straw about the new Iranian President, Rohani.

E: What should the west do now ... clearly the goal has to be to try to get things on a better parallel (sic), if possible, over the next couple of years?

JS: Yes ...

E: But you’re convinced that we can do business with Rohani? When will we know that he is a new deal, the real deal?

JS: I’m convinced we can ...

(BBC Radio 4 *Today*; 3–8–13)

In the example above, presenter B appeared to recognise a potential problem with his use of the word “we”. He did so again when interviewing Defence Secretary Philip Hammond about NATO policy following Russia’s occupation of Crimea.

... the point is that we have rather withdrawn, NATO has rather withdrawn certainly from Eastern Europe and Central Europe. Short of fighting a nuclear war which we obviously don’t conceive of doing, you do need to have some conventional forces available and that might be a way to go in the future.

(Anchor; BBC Radio 4 *Today*; 27–3–14)

### ***“Principal” position (10): The expert community***

If a journalist uses the term “we” when discussing a specialist subject (in this case genetics) it is difficult to interpret that as referring to a community made up of himself and the listeners or as a wider group (e.g. “the British people”, people in general or even “everyone”). The level of knowledge required to understand a complex subject (e.g. “the basic genetics underpinning brain function”) is such that reference to “our” understanding of it can only accurately refer to those “in the know”; after all they are the only “we” who are likely to develop new treatments for debilitating conditions. In this case, in a report for the *Today* programme, the BBC’s science correspondent reported on the work of two experts:



Laurence Wilkinson, who argues that by building on our growing understanding of the basic genetics underpinning brain function, with insights from imaging studies, stem cell research and animal models, we're finally beginning to get a better understanding of the biological basis of mental illness .... Prof Mike Owen, from Cardiff, says we're likely to need the insights from both biological and psychological approaches to mental illness if we're going to develop better treatments for a range of debilitating conditions ....

(Correspondent; BBC Radio 4 *Today*; 17–5–13)

### ***“Principal” position (11): The human race***

It might be argued that in the case above, the correspondent intended his “we” to refer in some sense to the human race and its progress. Another example which might be interpreted in that way was broadcast earlier the same day. Presenter E introduced a report from the BBC’s environment analyst about global warming with a question:

So what kind of risk are we taking with the climate ...?

(Anchor; BBC Radio 4 *Today*; 17–5–13)

The correspondent’s report continued in the same vein (and he may have written the introductory link for E in these terms):

So are we heating the seas? Some recent reports say there’s evidence that we are and it’s hard to see where else the projected warmth has gone.

(Analyst; BBC Radio 4 *Today*; 17–5–13)

### ***“Principal” position (12): “Everyone”, “all of us”***

Examples have already been seen where “we” might be interpreted to mean “everyone”. In a striking case which severely challenged the BBC guidelines on impartiality, presenter A interviewed Peter Watt, former General Secretary of the Labour Party, about trade union funding of the party and Ed Miliband’s speech (that day) to the TUC congress. As can be seen from the self-repair, he was conscious of having gone too far:

... the effect of this might be that the biggest of the trade unions – and they’re the ones that we’re all scared of – at least some people are scared of – because they’re so big and so powerful now – that in the short term at any rate – will gain power, they will increase their influence?

(Correspondent; BBC Radio 4 *Today*; 20–9–13)

Another example in which “we” is directly equated with “everybody” came in the item already referred to, in which presenter E interviewed the Defence Secretary about Afghans in British custody. E said at one point:

I think we take for granted the safety of British troops and I think it’s recognised by everybody that the authorities are in something of a conundrum here.

(Anchor; BBC Radio 4 *Today*; 29–5–13)

The previous section has categorised the uses of the word “we” in various ways. It might be argued that this is an artificial exercise and that many of these uses boil down to a

“shorthand” or a colloquial style which the listener is able to interpret. In spite of that, we would argue that they represent a clear blurring of the line between reporter and the subject, which has implications for the impartiality and accuracy of BBC journalism. What is more, as will now be seen, the use of the word “we” by a presenter can mean more than one thing within one broadcast item – a fact which must, at the very least, be a potential cause of confusion for the listener.

Presenter B welcomed listeners to the *Today* programme, broadcasting from the European Parliament building in Strasbourg:

I’m just outside the room where they all meet and we’ll be hearing today about the many issues that they and other Europeans face. Issues like Ukraine; issues like should we be stumping up more cash for that country? Have we reached a truce between the Commission and the UK Government over freedom of movement in Europe? Can the parliament stop the wasteful constant shuttling between Strasbourg and Brussels? We’ll bring you the sound of a gravy train and the complaints of those who don’t want to be on it.

(Anchor; BBC Radio 4 *Today*; 26–2–14)

The first “we” is the authentic “we” of the *Today* programme – we the reporters, in this case, possibly, joined to “you” the listeners. This meaning is clear in the last sentence (“We’ll bring you ...”). In between, the word changes its meaning. Presumably, “we the British” or “Britain” are implied in “...should we be stumping up more money”. Then again, in “Have we reached a truce ...”, “we” has a different meaning, equivalent to “has a truce been reached”. Perhaps the listener can decipher these different meanings, but is this the clarity which the Editorial Guidelines seek?

The same flitting between meanings can be seen in Presenter A’s introduction to the item on about British attitudes to the EU:

Are you becoming more sceptical about our membership of the European Union? A lot of people are – or so the polls suggest ... and that’s also what the British Social Attitudes Survey found ... results not published yet, but its co-founder Alison Parkes has been looking at them and she told us about the attitudes to the European Union ...

(Anchor; BBC Radio 4 *Today*; 15–5–14)

Here, “our membership” (compromising the reporter’s impartiality) can be seen alongside the term “a lot of people” (which reinforces it). Again, there is also the authentic “us” of the *Today* programme itself.

Perhaps most significant, at least from the point of view of the observance of due impartiality, are these occasions when there is no immediately inferable referent, such as in the following examples of the anchor’s interaction with an external expert interviewee:

“we probably always suspected that children of richer parents have a better chance of decent education than poorer children and not just those that go to private schools”

“so it [the report] does confirm what we’ve expected for a very long time”

(Anchor, BBC Radio 4 *Today*; 18–9–2013).

A tension arises here between the use of such comments and the BBC’s editorial guidelines, which include the admonition that “our reporting should resist the temptation to use language and tone which appear to accept consensus or received wisdom as fact or self-evident” and that “[o]ur audiences should not be able to tell from the BBC output the personal prejudices of our journalists or news and current affairs presenters on matters of public policy, political or industrial controversy, or on “controversial subjects” in other areas.” (BBC, 2015). Such

comments also sit uneasily with broader, conventionally adopted tenets of professional detachment, such as Manoff and Schudson's warning that "objective reporting means avoiding as much as possible the overt intrusion of the reporter's personal values into a news story and minimising explicit interpretation" (1986: 6).

Two potential factors may condition the interpretation of such cases, however. One is the extent to which the radio journalists' attitudinal stance in this type of exchange – what Goffman terms their "footing" – may involve the assumption of a "devil's advocate" role, a rhetorical strategy arguably geared towards a reader eliciting of information and opinions from the interviewee, as well as towards enlivening the interaction itself, an approach Clayman characterises as "the journalist-interviewer as populist" (2002: 211). Such a populism may in turn be linked to what Fairclough (1995: 144–149) has identified as the growing "conversationalization" of the news anchor's interactional style, one which takes advantage of the latitude which has come to be granted to this presenter role, based on its acceptance as a "reliable, familiar broadcasting personality with whom the audience can identify" (Kumar, 1975: 80). A second factor would revolve around what Flood *et al.* (2011) pinpoint as the tension between requirements for impartiality, fairness and balance, on the one hand, and parallel requirements, on the other, "to serve specific civic values deemed fundamental to British society ... liberal ideological assumptions".

## CONCLUSION

The examples reviewed above highlight the relevance to news journalism of Helmbrecht's observation that "the use of *we* pronouns is intrinsically connected to the linguistic establishment of social groups" (2002: 42). The key issue arising from this is the extent to which the invocation of such groups which is implied by these broadcast journalists' use of the first person plural is in conflict with key journalistic imperatives.

The patterns discernible in the examples are drawn from a modestly sized sample. However, they do suggest some interim conclusions, notably with regard to this PSB institution's editorial guidelines. While the importance of the broadcast news interview as the "classic public sphere in action" (Montgomery 2007b: 147), and of the *Today* programme in particular as, in the words of one of the news anchors featured in the examples, "a place where politicians would always be publicly held to account" (Hendy: 2007: 321; see also Marr, 2005), there are clearly areas which need attention. Firstly, there is evidence of a general need to codify norms which are seen to integrate the need for accuracy as well as impartiality, and that in both cases these norms need to take into account issues which might at first glance seem to be inconsequential, micro-level features of the journalists' language. While the BBC Guidelines are very clear on the need to preserve impartiality when the BBC is itself the story, and one of its representatives is the interviewee, the same clarity is lacking in relation to other stories and interviews, where the BBC's impartiality is, arguably, equally at risk. The evidence of this research suggests that there is a case for the BBC to look in detail at the circumstances where it is permissible for its journalists to use the terms 'we' and 'our', and to issue new guidelines in the light of these findings.

Beyond the institutional level, these preliminary findings may have a broader relevance for the understanding of the nature of "bias" in interactions between journalists and news interviewees, in particular politicians. Firstly, the findings endorse Clayman's contention

(1992) that the term “neutralism” should be preferred over “neutrality” in discussions of news interview talk, as this term captures the idea that the linguistic and interactive choices made on air seek but do not necessarily achieve an authentic impartiality, partly, as the examples discussed here show, because switches in footing designed to avoid the intrusion of personal opinions may nonetheless be subverted by an un-checked usage of first person pronouns (and related items). Secondly, with regard to imagined communities, there is a need for reflection regarding the nature and impact of journalists’ assumptions regarding shared values and viewpoints, in two related senses: (i) the nature of such assumptions; and (ii) the specific ways in which these assumptions can be reflected in interactive discourse, and how this can potentially compromise the perceived professionalism of news broadcasts. On this point, Goffman’s “footing” framework is helpful in elucidating what is at stake. One of the defining characteristics of “objective” journalistic speech, in contrast to most types of daily linguistic interaction, is that the unmarked stance involves, at most, a combination of the Author and Animator roles only (since the assumption of all three roles simultaneously would imply undue “subjectivity”). It therefore follows that it is on those occasions when broadcast news journalists are seen to adopt all three speaker roles simultaneously, as shown by the multiple instances of “Principal positions” categorised in the course of the analysis above, that their professional detachment and “objectivity” may appear most compromised.

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**Table 1 Radio news speaker roles** (adapted from Bell 1991: 39)

<b>Speaker role</b>	<b>Definition</b> (from Goffman 1981: 226)	<b>Typical radio news exponent of role</b>
<b>Animator</b>	“the sounding box from which utterances come”	Newsreader; anchor / interviewer; may also be correspondent, analyst, etc.
<b>Author</b>	“the agent who puts together, composes or scripts the lines that are uttered”	Those journalists who write, re-write and edit the news texts; may also be correspondent, analyst, etc.
<b>Principal</b>	“the party to whose position, stand, and belief the words attest”	If due impartiality or neutrality is to be achieved, arguably no-one at all, or simply “professional norms”.